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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000258

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN POPULAR OPINION: INFLATION, POLITICAL
PRISONERS LEAD CONCERNS

REF: ADDIS ABABA 00170

¶1. (C) SUMMARY In an informal survey Post conducted of Addis Ababa residents, interviewees said that the current domestic political climate has yet to recover fully from the violence that marked the 2005 post-election period, and that a subdued anger continues to fester as a result. However, despite the political unease, people's more immediate concerns relate to the increasing difficulty to make financial ends meet. Rising prices (over 20 percent last year) for food and other necessities are a daily concern for many, as incomes have not kept up with inflation, despite strong growth in the economy on the whole. Most respondents also said they support the GoE's involvement in Somalia and felt that intervention was necessary to prevent the spread of terrorism across borders.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On January 23, Poloff and senior political FSN conducted a random survey of Addis Ababa residents in order to gauge public opinion on key economic issues, the domestic political environment, and Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia. Though the sample size of respondents was not large (around 20), an effort was made to interview Ethiopians from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities and religions. (COMMENT: It should be noted that the survey was conducted only in Addis Ababa, which voted strongly in favor of opposition parities in the 2005 election. END COMMENT).

TROUBLE AFFORDING THEIR DAILY INJERA

¶3. (SBU) In light of the strong economic growth that Ethiopia has experienced over the last three years (6-8 percent), Poloff asked respondents whether they feel they are better off today than one or two years ago. Sixty-five percent said no, while those remaining said that their situation had improved moderately. Those who indicated that they are currently worse off all pointed to inflation as the key factor affecting them, particularly in the prices of basic food stuffs such as tef, the grain used to make the national staple bread injera. One interviewee, a social worker, said that prices for food had increased so much that he no longer can afford to eat three times per day, and is now forced to limit himself to two meals. Respondents also said that inflation in the areas of rent and transportation costs have also affected their daily lives. Most of those who complained of these issues, including one government employee, said that wages had failed to keep up with price increases.

14. (SBU) When asked what they felt the GoE could or should do to help improve the economic situation of the average citizen, the majority of respondents said they would like to see the government intervene in the markets for staple commodities and to put a cap on rising prices. Many also said that more could be done to stimulate investment, particularly as it relates the construction industry.

CUD RELEASE WOULD HEAL WOUNDS, DERG IRRELEVANT

15. (SBU) Interviewees were asked whether they thought the current political climate in the capital had calmed noticeably since post-election disturbances in June and November 2005. Though some said things were slowly getting back to normal, the majority recited nearly the same thing)- that the situation appears calm on the surface, but in fact people were still upset from the results of the May 2005 parliamentary elections and the government's response to the protests that followed. Several noted that they are afraid to be vocal in opposition to government policies as a result. When asked what, if anything, the GoE could do in order to ease the tension that remains, all said that a release of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders currently on trial for treason and genocide, as well as opening up of political space for political opposition, would send a very strong positive signal to the general populace.

16. (SBU) As a follow-up, interviewees were asked whether the events following the last election have influenced their willingness to participate in future elections, in particular the upcoming local elections in 2007. The majority said that they participated in the last election, but will not do so in

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the future unless the political climate changes significantly. Only a few of the respondents said that they would vote regardless. Nearly the same set of respondents that said the domestic political situation remains unstable, also said that they follow the trial of the CUD leaders in the press. All of those that follow the CUD trial said they do not believe the GoE is handling the case in a fair and transparent manner.

17. (SBU) Respondents were most split when asked whether they felt the recent sentencing of former Derg officials (reftel A) was too harsh, too lenient, or appropriate. Those that said that it was fair, including one interviewee that reported having a relative killed by the Derg regime, expressed relief that the defendants were not given the death penalty. Some though felt that the Derg deserved more severe punishment in light of the seriousness of the crimes that were committed) several said they felt the defendants "should be hanged." A surprising number, particularly those interviewees under 30 years old, said that the punishment was too severe and that, "their acts are water under the bridge, or that "Ethiopia should move on." Others said that the courts decision is irrelevant and that punishing these officials now, after a very long trial, "is like flogging a dead horse." A few also said that they are unaware of what crimes were committed and therefore had no opinion.

PRESENCE IN SOMALIA NECESSARY TO PROTECT BORDERS

18. (SBU) Three-quarters of respondents reported that they support Ethiopia's military intervention in Somalia. Of those, only two said that they initially were opposed and then changed their mind. Some added that they would have preferred that the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) been able to handle the conflict alone, but agreed with the GoE's decision to intervene in order to protect the country. When asked to what extent they felt Eritrea's role in supporting the CIC had in Ethiopia's decision to become

involved, all but one respondent said they did not know because there has been no obvious link demonstrated in the media. Poloff asked to what extent they felt the GoE was influenced to become involved in Somalia as a result of US foreign policy, the war on terrorism or the US's pursuit of al-Qaeda-linked terrorists. Nearly all respondents said that Ethiopia became involved on its own accord and due to the threat perceived to Ethiopia by terrorism. Some did say they felt that the US had blessed Ethiopia's involvement by tacitly supporting military action. Lastly, when asked whether they believed what effect the war in Somalia had on domestic Ethiopian politics, most saw no direct impact, though one person reported that he had heard of police round-ups of people who appear to be of Somali origin.

COMMENT: CUD DETAINEES REMAIN MAIN CHALLENGE FOR GOE

¶9. (SBU) While the military operation in Somalia remains an important challenge for the GoE, at home the primary concerns remain high food prices and continuing resentment over 2005 elections and their fallout. The military success in Somalia has probably strengthened GoE's standing somewhat -- winning greater popular respect, if not love -- but real stability will require a resolution of the detained CUD leaders' situation in particular. The current harvest season has not relieved pressure on food prices. Hoarding by farmers has kept prices artificially high. Prime Minister Meles requested food aid for the urban poor to force prices down to a more natural market price level.

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